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From Shame to Pride

The Politics of Shawi Identity in Contemporary Syria

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Abstract

This article is about the word Shawaya. Before the Syrian uprising, many Syrians used the term Shawaya in a derogatory manner when referring to a class of people perceived as backward, uneducated and vulgar. However, during the course of the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war, self-identification as a Shawi (the singular of Shawaya) became more prevalent among people belonging to this group of Syrian society. The Syrian uprising created a space for Shawaya to express their identity openly. As the Syrian uprising turned into a protracted conflict, the Shawi identity transformed into a political one as it became associated with the rural-urban divide characterizing the conflict. This article aims to explore the social and political implications of the word Shawaya in contemporary Syrian political culture by exploring the term and attempting to show how members of this group today express their Shawi identity both politically and socially.

Keywords

Syria – Syrian Civil War – identity – tribes – rural – urban

1 Introduction

When Syrian youths gathered in front of the Egyptian embassy in Damascus, expressing their solidarity with the Egyptian Revolution in February 2010, a security officer demanded the youths end the meeting, or he would be ‘releas-

ing the Shawaya¹ to forcefully disperse the gathering'. The word Shawaya refers to tribesmen from the eastern part of Syria known for their strong affiliation with the army and security apparatus. Prior to the Syrian conflict, the word Shawaya was used in a derogatory manner to describe a group of people that have been perceived as nomadic backward people. Syrians frequently shared photos and videos mocking their accent, behavior, clothing and food. Self-identification with the Shawi identity became very prominent after the Syrian uprising among the people who belonged to this social component of the Syrian society. The Syrian uprising enabled the Shawaya to express to express their identity overtly. Shawi identity has also become strongly linked with the rural urban divide that was a clear feature of the Syrian conflict since its early beginnings. This paper aims to shed the light on the social and political aspects of the word Shawaya by analysing the term and attempting to dig deep into how members of this group express their identity both political and socially. Partly based on two interviews conducted with social media activists, this article argues that the Shawi identity has become salient after the Syrian uprising and reflects the group's reaction to having been forced to confront issues, including discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes (Ting-Toomey et al. 2000). Expressing the Shawi identity moved from a source of shame to one of pride. As Phinney (1991) demonstrates, persons with a high salience of ethnic identity have strong feelings towards group memberships, they evaluate their groups positively and are interested in their groups' culture and history.

2 The Origin of the Word

There are different narratives about the origin and the meanings of the term Shawaya. Etymologically speaking, many historians explain that Shawaya is derived from Shat, meaning sheep, characterizing Shawaya groups as 'shepherds' (Lange 2014). Others say that the word comes from Shawa, meaning to grill meat, referring to their previous lifestyle as nomads (Al-Sahw 2020). A third narrative explains that the word 'Shawaya' is the name of an Arab tribe that once existed in northeast Syria, but no specific tribe with this name exists in the region now (Sato 1996).

Regardless of the etymological origin of the word, the term was used to distinguish this group of people from another group called 'Bedouin'. Historically, the common tribes (Shawaya) were shepherders who stayed near agricultural

1 Shawaya is used in this article as the plural of Shawy, while Shawi is used as an adjective.

lands to find pasture for their herds, while the noble tribes (Bedouin) roamed the desert herding camels, the latter more mobile, had greater prestige than the former, or common tribes (Chatty 1986). Therefore, Shawaya describes a group of people that neither lived in urban centers nor roamed the desert as nomadic Bedouin tribes. They inhabit an area called al-Jazira, an 'island' in Arabic. It covers a vast area in northeastern Syria and is composed of three administrative governorates: Deir ez-Zur, Al-Hasakah and Raqqa, all at the center of the case study discussed below.

3 From the Rural Areas to the Cities: The Shawayya Encounter Urban People

Since its independence from French mandatory power and until the 1970s, Syria's rulers hailed from major urban centers. Hafez al-Assad was the first president in the history of Syria to be of peasant extraction, and he was unreserved in declaring this origin (Batatu 1999). In addition to building his power based on a network of Alawites placed in strategic positions, Hafez al-Assad broadened the base of his regime and co-opted a large proportion of the rural Sunnis, particularly from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, into the army, party leadership and security apparatus. These policies were accompanied by large-scale migration from rural areas to major cities, including Aleppo, Damascus and Homs. The Syrian anthropologist Sulayman Khalaf (1981) describes how, in the 1970s, Shawaya streamed into cities staking their claim for the spoils of the revolution, and how Damascenes depicted them with obvious bitterness, describing the character of the aggressive village people as 'naively crude and lacking urbane city ways'. State institutions became important channels for achieving some sort of social mobility for the Shawaya. The strategy of recruiting Shawi tribes into the security apparatus was useful because they were less likely to feel empathy for other Syrians—Shawaya were often mistreated by the urban people of Syria—which they might be called upon to arrest or torture based on regime orders (Sadowski 1988).

Although the Shawaya took pride in their tribal belonging and their agricultural lifestyle, they rarely used the term Shawaya when referring to themselves at this stage. They often used the words Arab, Bedouin or rural peasants in an attempt to present themselves on an equal footing with other segments of Syrian society. Identifying themselves as Shawaya would have implied their acceptance of negative stereotypes labeled by others (Sato 1996). For example, one of my interviewees from the Raqqa countryside, who moved to study at the University of Aleppo in 2003, told me how he and his fellows from the same village

were often regarded by other Syrians from the cities as backward and ignorant (Interviewee 1, 2021). This made some Shawaya alter accents and clothing in order to obscure their true origin. Others have completely rejected the Shawi association because of its negative connotations. These negative stereotypes haunted the Shawaya even more after a drought devastated their region, triggering them to migrate into cities in search of alternative income. According to Khaled al-Jaberi, a tribesman from Tay who moved to Damascus, people looked down upon them. 'They called us gypsies when we belong to the big important tribes. It was such a catastrophe for us' (Dukhan 2019).

4 From Shame to Pride: Shawaya during the Uprising and the Civil War

The Syrian uprising was accompanied by a sharp increase in the use of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The purpose was to convey images of public protests to the international media, as the TV news were not able to supply reporters on the ground. Moreover, as the Syrian uprising transitioned into a civil war causing the displacement of millions to countries across the world, more people relied on social media to be updated on developments in Syria and keep in touch with relatives scattered across the globe. The use of social media has also led to an unprecedented number of public discussions relating to Syrian politics and society. The Shawaya themselves have started taking the initiative to articulate the social and political role of their identity through social media platforms. Confronting prejudice from other segments of Syrian society as well as the disdain of the most educated urban elite, the Shawaya have opted to present a more positive image of themselves since 2011 (Lange 2015). What is interesting about these new forms of Shawi self-consciousness, in the sense of a 'shared identity', is that it cut across tribal boundaries and focuses on particular aspects of identity rather than on the differential dimensions of tribal divisions. Below, I will discuss how the Shawaya have been attempting to demonstrate group distinctiveness vis-a-vis others and distinguish social or political traits to define their position within Syrian society.

Firstly, there have been attempts by the Shawaya to emphasize the positive aspects of their heritage through accent, clothing and food. By doing so, Shawaya have been downplaying what urban people perceive as the supposed backwardness and primitive character of tribalism. For example, Ahmad al-Hussein, a Syrian refugee living in the Netherlands, wrote an article about the characteristics of Shawi identity that he was not able to expose in pre-war

Syria.² Some of these include his inability to wear traditional rural clothing called *galabieh* in cities. He also mentioned that he felt the need to alter his dialect when speaking to a girl at university for a date. Al-Hussein concluded his article by noting, 'we, the Shawaya of Syria, should receive special treatment in Europe in order to recover from the amount of racism and discrimination that we have been exposed to during our life in Syria' (al-Hussein 2020). Instead of shame for their accent, clothing and way of serving food, previously associated with a profound lack of urbanity, the witness (Interviewee 2 2021), who lives in Turkey today, asserted that features of his group's identity convey positive qualities, such as Arab authenticity, generosity and nobility which urban people lack, according to him. Social media platforms became replete with pages helping to introduce Shawi dialect to the Syrians, namely 'the dictionary of Shawaya', other pages of the community in exile 'the Shawi forum in Germany' or pages revealing pride in the community 'Proud to be Shawi'.

Secondly, Shawi self-representations emphasizing their 'heroic' role in the Syrian uprising, where they contrast themselves with urban people, have come to the fore. My interviewees and the social media accounts referring to the Shawaya, focus strongly on the events of the Syrian uprising and the civil war, highlighting acts of resistance against the regime which 'maintain their tribal honor as brave fighters'. These narratives usually include comparisons with city dwellers who were not as rebellious as the Shawaya against the regime, according to them. For example, DeirEzzor24 (2016), which is a news platform established in 2015 to deliver the news of Deir Ezzor's community, describes how the Shawaya sacrificed their 'life and blood' in support of other Syrians suppressed by the regime for revolting. The Shawi identity has been presented in such a way as to juxtapose the actions of the Shawaya, resistant against the regime, with the timid position of city dwellers described as '*ramadeyin*' (meaning 'the gray people' in reference to Syrians whose political position was deemed unclear) (Enabbalad 2013). The emergent voices present Shawi identity in a carefully weighed manner to the outside world, highlighting aspects that are compatible with dignified and heroic narratives, excluding more quotidian aspects (Lange 2019).

Thirdly, their new collective identity takes pride in societal figures from al-Jazirah and encourages recollections of past events from Shawi history. Those who promote the new identity disregard the complex realities of social divi-

2 The Arabic dialect spoken by the Shawaya is different from that spoken by city dwellers in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary. For example, the word for village, *qarya*, in the city dialect, which is the same as standard Arabic, becomes *yyarya* in the Shawaya dialect; and the dog, *kalb*, becomes *chalb* (Sato 1996).

sions existing in many oral narratives of tribal history. They speak of Shawi resistance against French colonial power in Syria, ignoring the fact that the Shawaya were divided between tribes supporting the French and those fighting against them. They also repeatedly mention the names of those they describe as Shawi intellectuals to prove that members of their community have attained the highest level of education in a similar way to other segments of the Syrian society. So, they talk of the Syrian novelist and politician Abdul-Salam Ojeili as a Shawi simply because he was born in Raqqa. They also describe Yassin al-Hafez, a Syrian intellectual born in Deir Ezzor, as Shawi. These claims do not question whether Ojeili and al-Hafez preserved their Shawi identity after moving to Aleppo and Damascus, respectively. These examples demonstrate how history is reframed to support current representations of the Shawaya in Syrian society.

5 Conclusion

Northrup (1989) argues that the salience of a particular identity for an ethnic group relative to other identities depends on circumstance and setting. The salience of identity becomes greater within groups experiencing significant levels of prejudice and victimization (Cuhadar and Dayton 2011). This article argues that there has been a general trend during the past decade of growing self-identification for members of the Shawi tribes. Before the Syrian uprising, the word Shawaya was associated with images of backwardness, ignorance and savagery. Within the Shawi community, there was an awareness of the distinctiveness of their group identity. However, expressions of identity were not articulated to the public until after the eruption of the Syrian conflict. Druckman et al. (2013) argue that conflicts increase the salience of ethnic identity, which in turn increases group affection by expressing attitudes countering the perceived typical opinions of their community. In the last ten years, the term Shawaya became a source of pride for the group and became more acceptable among members of Syrian society in general. The word is now used to emphasize the positive aspects of Shawaya heritage through accent, clothing and food. It also articulates their resistance to the Syrian regime in comparison to city dwellers who were accused of timidity and shyness in their position towards the oppression. The Shawaya have brought the heroic past events of their community to the fore in order to refashion current representations of their community in Syrian society.

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